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ABSTRACT

Credit completion rates, learner performance data, tutor input, and costs were compared between tutors managed by an incentive pay scheme and tutors paid a fixed rate. The incentive pay scheme calculated tutors' pay using learner completion rates; the fixed rate was for each learner enrolled per month. Two tutors in the incentive pay group and a third control tutor worked with learners in two introductory courses: World Ecology and Introduction to Computing. Tutors served as telephone tutors for home study packaged courses delivered by Athabasca University. Results indicated little difference in learner performance or credit completion rates between groups. The amount and quality of information provided by incentive pay scheme tutors was larger and more regular than for controls. Costs of implementing both systems were not found to be significantly different. The tutor was suggested as an agent of motivation in distance education. (Three tables and four figures are attached.) (Author/YLB)

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Project REDEAL

An Examination of Tutor Management Strategies For Use in Distance Education

Dan O Coldeway

REDEAL Research Report #2

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Abstract

Credit completion rates, learner performance data, tutor input, and costs were compared between tutors managed by an incentive pay scheme which calculated tutors' pay using learner completion rates in comparison to tutors paid a fixed rate for each learner enrolled per month. Tutors in all groups served as telephone tutors for home study, packaged courses delivered by Athabasca University. Results indicated little difference in learner performance or credit completion rates between groups. The amount and quality of information provided by incentive pay scheme tutors was larger and more regular than for all controls. Cost of implementing both systems were not found to be significantly different. A discussion of the tutor as an agent of motivation in distance education is presented.

An Examination of Tutor Management Strategies for Use in Distance Education

In most systems of distance education (i.e. correspondence education), a system of two-way communication between the learner and the institution is maintained through a learner-tutor communication channel (Holmberg, 1974). This channel can take many forms including contact through the postal system, telephone communications, person-to-person contacts, etc. In whatever way or combination of ways that interaction takes place, the tutor remains an important feature of a majority of distance educational systems.

In attempting to determine the total range of influences on distance-learner motivation, tutoring always forms a major part of the picture. There is little question in the minds of most workers in distance education that the tutor does (or could) serve an important function in the overall motivation and management of the distance learner. Baath and Wangdahl (1976) addressed the importance of the tutor as "an agent of motivation in correspondence education" and concluded that the tutor is viewed by institutions as serving an important motivational function. However, their research also pointed out that often institutions' and educators' views on tutor effectiveness were much more positive than the students'. Moreover, one of two studies conducted by Baath and Wangdahl failed to confirm the hypothesis that extensive feedback and increased personal and supporting comments would result in better student performance and lower withdrawal rates.

In comparison to the results obtained by Baath and Wangdahl (1974) other workers in distance education report a direct relationship between the attitudes and personal abilities of tutors and learner success. Stein (1960) indicated that warm and friendly tutors had higher completion rates and vice versa. However, a closer analysis of Stein's report indicates that the above conclusion was based on a single course case involving the change of a tutor from one Stein felt was "a cold, subject-oriented man" to someone who "liked people." The limitations of Stein's sample and the crude measurement of personal attitudes and abilities aside, the distance educational literature is replete with testimonials to the importance of the tutor as an agent of motivation (Graff, 1965; Harper, 1971; Holmberg, 1974; Knowles, 1966). Furthermore, the intuitive sensibility of the importance of human contact and the type of human contact that would be most effective has provided much of the support for the continued use of tutors in distance education.

Although there is little doubt about the importance of investigating and understanding the personal attitudes and abilities of tutors which may make them effective, questions regarding the actual management of tutors within the institution also require answers. This is especially important when part-time tutors are used and/or if tutors are not all in a single location (i.e. in the field). The present study was an attempt to provide information about the importance of tutor management for part-time telephone tutors working from their homes.

The problems surrounding tutor management are many. However, there do appear to be a few basic management concepts that help clarify the tutor-management situation. For example, the strongly held opinion that effective tutoring should result in better learner performance suggests that learner performance could be used as a measure of tutor effectiveness. Following a basic "management-by-objectives" approach would make it possible to match tutor pay (the management problem) to the credit completion behavior of the learner (the objective), resulting in a pay-for-learner-success scheme based on the assumption that tutors have some degree of control over learner success. Not only would such a relationship between learner success and tutor pay follow directly from the strongly held view of most distance educators regarding the role and effect of tutors (e.g. Stein, 1960), the system would have motivational merit of its own by providing an incentive to tutors to be, or become maximally effective with distance learners.

The present experiment was an attempt to directly test the effect of a tutor management system that paid tutors in a direct relationship with the performance of students assigned to them. The goals of this research were as follows:

a) Determine whether direct payment of tutors for learner success would increase learner success rates.

b) Determine whether a direct payment to tutors for learner success scheme could be implemented and controlled.

c) Determine whether the volume of information on student performance would increase if tutors were also paid for submitting detailed reports on the performance of students falling behind schedule.

d) Determine the cost to the institution for a direct payment to tutors based on learner performance scheme in comparison to the existing Athabasca University scheme of paying tutors a fixed rate for each student enrolled each month.

Method

The general design of this research study is shown in Figure 1. Two introductory courses (World Ecology and Introduction to Computing) were selected in an effort to place both an experienced tutor and an newly hired tutor in the incentive pay scheme groups (tutors #1 and #2 respectively). Course B also allowed a third tutor (tutor #3) to be used as a special control. Tutor #3 was not paid according to the incentive pay scheme, but was asked to submit monthly reports on learner progress and individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms for those learners not keeping up with the University's one-credit-per-two-month rate.

Figure 1 goes about here

All tutors in the third control group were simply used as a basis of comparison for the incentive pay scheme group and the reporting-only group. These tutors were not required to submit forms and were not contacted by the research team at any time during the experiment.

The incentive pay scheme replaced the standard Athabasca University tutor pay method ($7.50 per month per student) for tutors #1 and #2. Both of these tutors were interviewed and asked if they would volunteer to participate in an experiment using the incentive pay scheme and both agreed to do so. That incentive pay scheme was designed as follows:

a) Tutors would be paid $20 for each student assigned to them who completed a credit of course work within two months of their official start date or within two months of the completion of a previous credit (designated credit completed or "cc").

b) Tutors would be paid $10 for submitting a learner troubleshooting analysis form for every learner assigned to them who did not meet the requirement in item a) above (designated non-completion or "nc").

c) Tutors would be paid $5 if, after submitting a troubleshooting analysis form, the learner eventually completed the credit (designated late completion or "lc").

d) All tutor renumeration for tutors #1 and #2 would be handled according to items a) to c) above. No other method of payment would apply.

Both tutors #1 and #2 received a packet, including detailed instructions, of monthly reporting forms and learner troubleshooting analysis forms. The reporting forms required only that the proper designation be written in under the appropriate month for each learner. The troubleshooting analysis forms required that the tutor answer a series of questions which attempted to identify why learners were behind schedule, what had already been done to assist the learner, and what strategy the tutors would recommend to assist the learner in the future. Tutors were asked to submit information monthly directly to the author. The author recorded the information, calculated the pay, and forwarded the pay request so that each tutor would be paid as soon as possible.

Dependent Measures

The primary goal of this experiment was to determine the effect of the incentive pay scheme on learner rate of progress in courses. The original hypothesis was as follows:

> Athabasca University tutors who are paid only when their individual learners obtain course credit will be more effective in keeping learners on schedule (defined as a learner completing a credit every two months).

All available measures of learner performance (percentage of learners completing each credit, average number of days to the completion of each credit, and average mark on credit exams) were collected in an effort to evaluate the above hypothesis.

A secondary goal of this experiment involved an interest in the type and quality of information available from tutors on individuals not progressing at the one-credit-per-two-month-rate. It was hypothesized that:

> Athabasca University tutors could be the richest source of information on problem areas in course design and content if they were paid for submitting reports on learners not progressing through credits.

The individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms were used as the measure for this hypothesis.

Since the incentive pay scheme concept could be potentially more costly than the existing tutor pay scheme, costing data were calculated and compared across all groups. Although specific hypotheses were not formulated to deal with costs, based on the above two hypotheses, the author anticipated that costs for the incentive pay scheme would be higher.

Results

Learner Completion Per Credit of Instruction:

Figures 2 and 3 show the comparative percentage completion rates per credit of instruction for both courses A and B for all tutors. With the exception of a large difference in course B percentage completion rates for credit one for the incentive pay tutor (62% vs. 20% and 24% for the control tutors), there was little difference in credit completion rates between any of the groups. The pattern of credit completions

was similar for all tutors within each course. Approximately 50 percent of the students do not complete the first credit for all tutors in both courses and the credit completion percentage declines steadily through each credit, sometimes going as low as zero in the last two credits.

Figures 2 and 3 go about here

Learner Examination Marks and Days to Completion of Credits:

Table 1 presents the average examination mark and the average number of days to completion of credit examinations for each credit, in both courses, for all tutors. Table 1 reveals little difference in examination performance between learners in any group. Examination marks tend to fall near the mid-point between 60% (the lowest passing mark) and 100% (i.e. 80%).

Table 1 goes about here

Table 1 indicates that the mean days to completion of credits varies widely across groups. A closer examination of course A would indicate that tutor number one's learners took from 40 to 50 percent longer to complete credits than the other tutors'. A similar, but less dramatic trend, also appears in the course B data, with tutor number two's learners taking approximately 10 to 20 percent longer to complete credits. However, a t-test comparing incentive pay

scheme tutors with all other tutors, using days to credit completions as the dependent variable revealed a non-significant difference ($t = 1.59$, 141 df; $p > .10$), which would suggest that the above difference in days to completion may simply represent an artifact of a small subset of the tutors learner cohort.

The days to completion of credits for all tutors in relationship to the Athabasca University baseline rate of progress expected of learners (one credit completed every two months) in shown in Figure 4. In almost all cases the rate of progress for learners in all conditions is slower than the baseline rate. Moreover, since the cohort of learners is continually reduced by attrition, slower learners who have withdrawn from courses are not included in the rate data in later credits (e.g. credits 4 - 6).

Figure 4 goes about here

Tutor Performance

Of particular interest in this experiment was the performance of tutors with respect to the completion of monthly reports and learner troubleshooting analysis forms (incentive pay scheme and reporting-only tutors). Since incentive pay scheme tutors' monthly pay were based entirely upon the data submitted by them on monthly reports and any pay for learners not on schedule was based upon tutors' submission

of individual learner troublshooting analysis forms, both incentive pay scheme tutors submitted all forms required, on time and complete. In comparison, the tutor who volunteered to submit monthly forms in course B only submitted one report near the end of the project (upon request from the author) and did not submit individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms at any time during the project.

A second reporting-only tutor also volunteered to submit both types of monthly forms in a third course (course C). This tutor submitted two monthly reports with accompanying individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms. However, both reports were over one month late and only a limited amount of information was included on the individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms on both occasions.

The individual learner troubleshooting analysis forms submitted by incentive pay scheme tutors were analyzed to determine the types of input tutors were able to offer for learners behind schedule. Table 2 summarizes tutors' responses to non-open-ended questions on the form. As presented in Table 2, tutors clearly used the telephone as the major communication tool to encourage learners who were behind schedule.

Table 2 goes about here

The most common suggestions put forth by tutors regarding what Athabasca University should do for learners behind schedule were

written in by tutors under the "other" section of the form. The majority of reasons included under "other" indicated that the tutor felt "nothing should be done." The second most common suggestions were to withdraw learners from the course and/or extend them in the course.

Cost Analysis of the Incentive Pay Scheme

A breakdown of the costs associated with both the incentive pay scheme and the standard Athabasca University pay scheme ($7.50 per learner per month enrolled) is presented in Table 3. Costs for the incentive pay scheme, although potentially one-third higher, were not significantly different from what those costs would have been under the standard Athabasca University pay scheme.

Table 3 goes about here

Discussion

Learner Rate of Progress

The results of this experiment did not demonstrate that learner progress could be facilitated by a tutor pay scheme which directly tied amount of pay with learner progress. The data indicate that learner progress under the direction of incentive scheme tutors did not differ from learner progress under the supervision of tutors paid according to the standard Athabasca University tutorial pay system. If tutors are capable of providing assistance which would directly

impact learner progress to a significant degree, it appears that a pay for-learner-progress system which encourages that assistance does not guarantee that it will be provided. However, an examination of the types of tutorial recommendations made for learners behind schedule would suggest that tutors are not capable of overcoming motivational difficulties of learners which impede their progress in courses (i.e. personal difficulties, job-related problems, etc.).

In contrast, the present study did not provide evidence that an incentive pay scheme for tutors had any detrimental effects on either learners or tutors. As was discussed above, learner progress under the supervision of incentive pay scheme tutors was closely related to the progress rates of control tutors. Moreover, tutors participating in the incentive pay scheme system did not appear to find the system dysfunctional or unsatisfactory along any dimension.

Type and Quality of Information Provided by Tutors

The incentive pay scheme did provide a rich source of information, from the tutors' perspective, on learners who were behind schedule. Furthermore, this information was obtained on a regular schedule in a fairly easy to process manner. In contrast, volunteer tutors who were asked to supply the same type of information did not provide that information on a regular basis, and the quality of the information they did provide, given that it was irregular and late, was questionable.

If more detailed and regular reporting of problems facing learners behind schedule was the only goal, the incentive pay scheme appears to

be worthy of consideration. Tutors in the incentive pay scheme system must provide the information required of the pay system or not get paid. It is unlikely that tutors working under a different pay system (like the standard Athabasca University pay system in place at the time of this experiment) would view the completion of numerous forms on a regular schedule as anything but added work and a waste of time (independent of whether the information was used or not). Although the tutors who volunteered to send in information (those in the reporting-only group) may have been more likely to send that information in if they were encouraged by the author and/or other members of staff, it is clear such encouragement is not necessary at all under the incentive pay system. The old cliche "you get what you pay for" seems to be supported by the present experiment.

Incentive Pay Scheme Costs

One of the major concerns at the outset of this project involved the added costs the incentive pay scheme could potentially incur. Although the potential increase in costs would have been associated with an increase in learner completion of credits, added costs would have made the incentive pay scheme look considerably less attractive. The present experiment clearly indicates that increased costs were not a problem with the incentive pay scheme, largely due to a lack of increased rates of performance on the part of learners under the direction of incentive pay scheme tutors. However, should the

incentive pay scheme concept be tested more extensively, and found to have an effect on learner progress, the costs will undoubtedly increase.

General Discussion

Athabasca University has recently given considerable attention to the question of tutor pay and tutor management (primarily the former). The standard pay scheme in place at the time of this study has already been replaced by an hourly pay scheme (tutors submit time sheets and are paid at a rate of $10 per hour). This system was selected for the following reasons: first, it appears to be fair to all tutors across courses. Since some courses require more time than others, flat rates of any type often discriminate against tutors who must do more to "get the job done". Second, the hourly scheme is relatively easy to administer. Time sheets drive the pay system and tutors can be encouraged to submit time sheets on a regular schedule by refusing to pay them if their time sheets are not in by a certain date. Third, the hourly scheme respects tutors who spend more time on university-related activity. Since many tutors do other University and course-related tasks other than telephone tutoring (e.g. marking, participating in University committees) they can be compensated fairly for those activities.

The selection of a tutor pay scheme at Athabasca University has

focussed mainly upon the tutor, rather than the learner, as the major concern. Fairness and respect for tutors have been important considerations in the selection of a pay scheme. Given the results of this study with respect to learner performance, it appears that taking into consideration such concerns may be appropriate. It would appear that tutors have a limited amount of control over learner progress, especially for those learners who have problems not directly related to the course design, content, or organization. Although it can, and has been argued that tutors can learn skills which would make them more effective with a variety of learners (Williams, 1980), such training and orientation could probably be handled and managed without the use of an incentive pay system for tutors.

The one variable examined in the present study which does indicate that an incentive system may still have merit for Athabasca University tutors (and tutors at other institutions doing a similar job), is that of volume and quality of information supplied on learners by tutors. Although the validity and specific usefulness of the information provided by incentive pay scheme tutors in the present study was not examined carefully, it is the opinion of this author that such information can be an important and potent source of data in improving learner success in distance education. The benefit to the incentive pay scheme is that such information is made almost automatic. Serious consideration to the collection of

such information, independent of pay schemes should be given. Moreover, further investigations into the validity and usefulness of that information should be conducted.

The results obtained in this study also speak to the general motivational problems facing distance learners. In a recent report by Baath and Wangdahl (1976) the tutor "as an agent of motivation in correspondence education" was addressed. These authors reviewed reports referring to the importance of the tutor as an agent of motivation. They also point to limited evidence that tutors may not be capable of improving learner motivation. Although much of this literature speaks to the relationship between tutor behavior (providing feedback and interpersonal support) and learner performance (usually measured by withdrawal rates), the existing study adds to the evidence on the lack of control tutors have over learner performance. Given that most, if not all, Athabasca University tutors are told to be encouraging, supportive, and friendly and that the incentive pay scheme could be viewed as further encouraging tutors to capitalize upon those skills, the results are not encouraging.

The generally high attrition rates reported in this study for all tutors point out the overall motivational problems in distance learning environments. Athabasca University can be generally considered a type 4 institution (the materials plus dialogue plus correspondence model characterized by Baath and Wangdahl, 1976), implying that the instructional materials package should be almost capable of standing alone allowing the tutor to provide the "motivational furthering" needed for learners. The data in this

study would suggest such a concept is largely theoretical, rather than practical. That is, it appears much easier to talk about the importance of tutoring as an agent of motivation than it is to actually increase learner motivation through tutorial support. Given the importance placed on the tutor in most distance educational institutions, it would appear that much more research and evaluation efforts need to be mounted to better understand the practical side of the tutoring equation, and whether tutors add significantly to the performance of learners presented with well developed correspondence packages of instruction.

In contrast to the above argument, other variables deemed important in distance learner performance (instructional materials design concerns, learner counselling, etc.) must also be examined. The motivational picture for the distance learner cannot be completed unless distance education researchers and practitioners alike are willing to systematically and carefully evaluate the effects of their methods and procedures.

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Table 1

Exam Marks and Days to Completion of Credits for All Groups

CREDIT		Course A (6 credits)		Course B (6 credits)			Course B (3 credits)		
		Tutor #1	Others	Tutor #2	Tutor #3	Other	Tutor #2	Tutor #3	Other
1)	$\bar{X}$ mark	82.0	79.9	85.8	87.1	83.2	81.2	92.0	81.0
	$\bar{X}$ days	95.4	65.4	94.9	66.9	79.8	120.0	68.0	82.0
2)	$\bar{X}$ mark	78.8	81.7	89.0	90.8	91.0	80.3	80.0	85.1
	$\bar{X}$ days	223.8	99.6	159.9	107.0	127.2	203.0	95.0	158.4
3)	$\bar{X}$ mark	76.0	80.1	92.0	88.7	88.3	94	77.5	86.4
	$\bar{X}$ days	279.0	133.7	167.7	174.0	149.0	198.0	152.5	198.7
4)	$\bar{X}$ mark	85.7	81.9	74.0	75.0	--			
	$\bar{X}$ days	259.7	160.7	186.0	259.0	--			
5)	$\bar{X}$ mark	83.7	80.7	83.0	--	--			
	$\bar{X}$ days	307.3	185.3	186.0	--	--			
6)	$\bar{X}$ mark	88.0	82.0	77	--	--			
	$\bar{X}$ days	362.5	153.0	186.0	--	--			

$\bar{X}$ mark - average mark on credit exam.

$\bar{X}$ days - average number of days from course start date to exam.

Table 2

Summary of Input Made by Incentive Pay Scheme Tutors on Individual Learner Troubleshooting Analysis Forms

What have you done to encourage the learner?	Tutor #1	Tutor #2	Total
a) telephone calls	44	135	179
b) letters	2	5	7
c) meetings	1	1	2
d) supplementary materials	1	0	1
Why is this learner behind schedule?			
a) family related problems	7	11	18
b) job related problems	14	35	49
c) outside of course activities	5	9	14
d) poor study habits	4	3	7
e) course materials too difficult	2	3	5
f) poor reading habits	2	0	2
g) illness	1	1	2
h) delay in receipt of course materials	0	0	0
i) delay in being assigned a tutor	0	0	0
What should A.U. do to help this learner?			
a) withdraw him/her from course	4	10	14
b) provide student counselling	1	3	4
c) extend his/her time for course completion	7	7	14
d) have course coordinator contact the learner	2	1	3
e) other (not on list)	8	46	54
Total # of forms returned over 9 months	32	126	158

Table 3

Cost Comparison Data Between the Standard Athabasca University Pay System and the Experimental Incentive Pay Scheme

MONTH	TUTOR #1		TUTOR #2		TOTAL	
	A.U. pay system	Incentive system	A.U. pay system	Incentive system	A.U. pay system	Incentive system
Nov.	142.50	275.00	82.50	150.00	225.00	425.00
Dec.	150.00	115.00	345.00	540.00	495.00	655.00
Jan.	127.50	105.00	382.50	255.00	510.00	360.00
Feb.	112.50	70.00	352.50	375.00	465.00	445.00
Mar.	105.00	70.00	352.50	130.00	457.50	220.00
Apr.	112.50	65.00	300.00	295.00	412.50	360.00
May	112.50	55.00	300.00	95.00	412.50	150.00
June	112.50	55.00	247.50	300.00	360.00	355.00
TOTAL	975.00	830.00	2362.50	2140.00	3337.00	2970.00

A.U. pay system - $7.50 per month per student enrolled.

Incentive system - pay based on performance of students

Figure 1

Tutor Management Study: Experimental Design

Course	Incentive Pay Scheme	Reporting Only	Control Group
A*	Tutor #1		All other tutors
6 cr.	n = 14		n = 37
B**	Tutor #2	Tutor #3	All other tutors
3 cr.	n = 24	n = 10	n = 54
6 cr.	n = 21	n = 25	n = 26
Totals	N = 59	N = 35	N = 77

* Course A is World Ecology 201

** Course B is Computing 205

Figure 2

Percentage of Learner Completions Per Credit in Course A

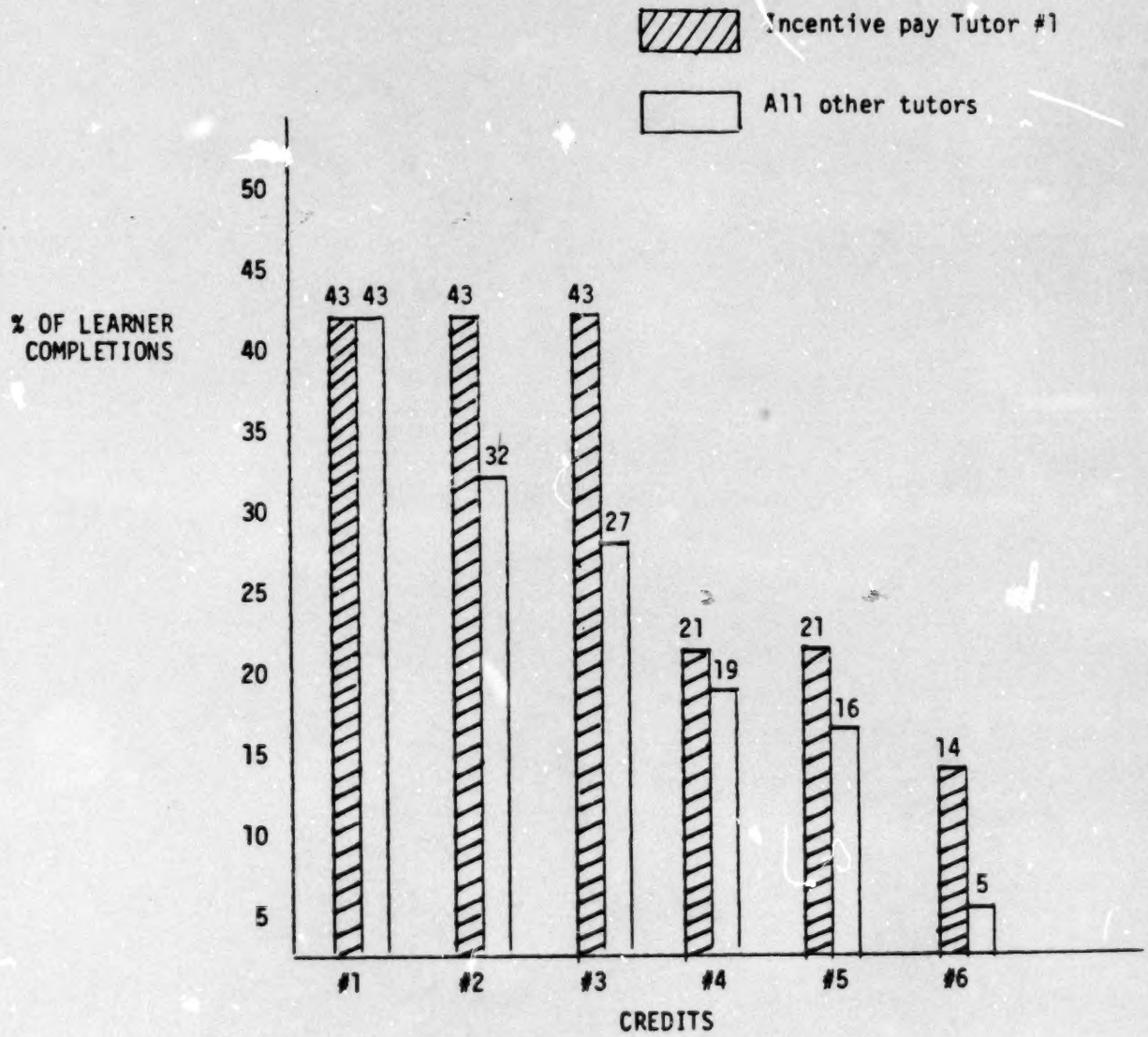

Figure Three: Percentage of learner completions per credit in both 3 and 6 credit versions of Course B

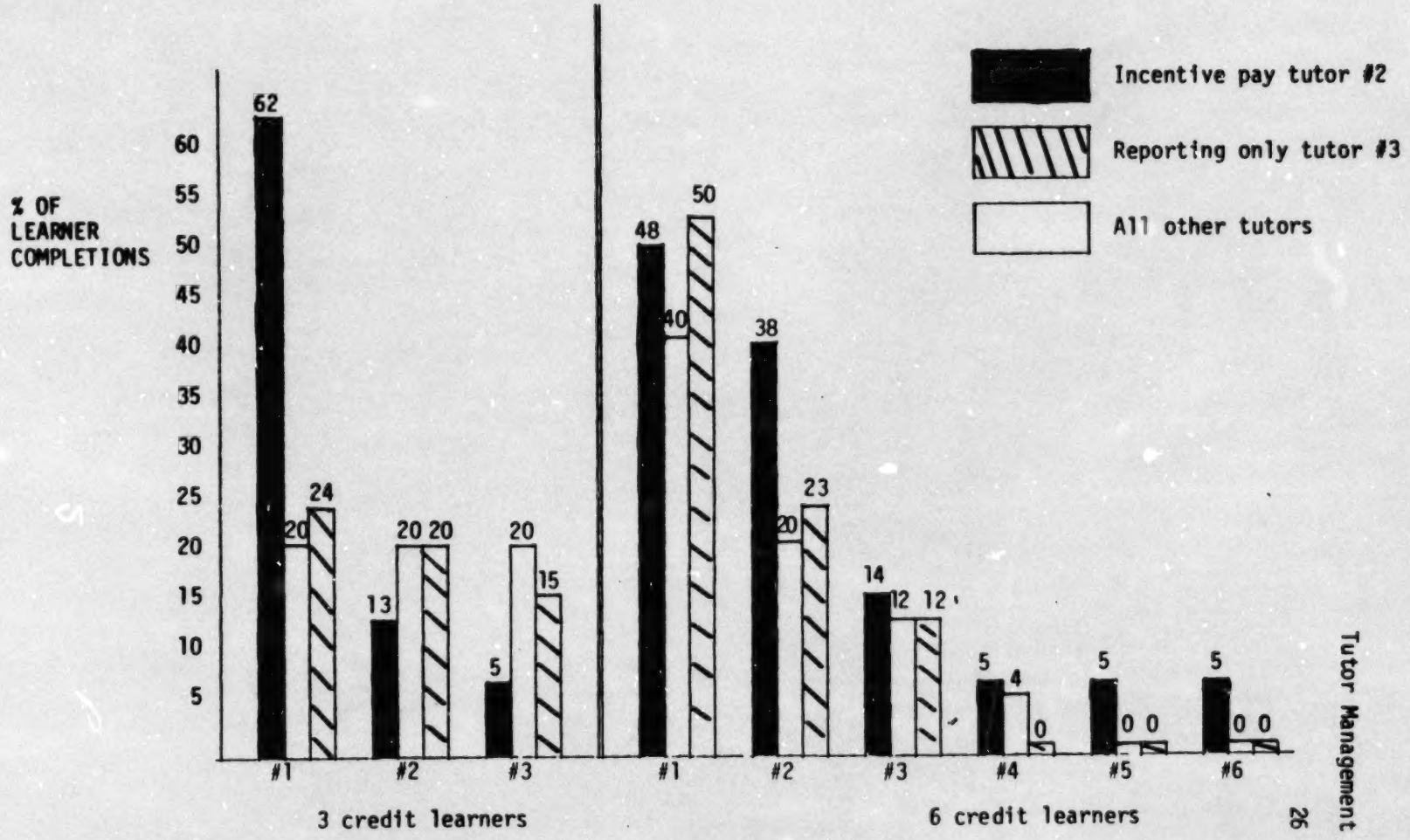

Figure 4

Days to Completion Per Credit in Relationship to Athabasca University Baseline Progress Rate (One Credit/Two Months)